

## A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

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(Continued.)

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Concludes a Life Story.

"I must apologize to the ladies," Garshore said, bowing with studied politeness as he closed the door behind him. "My train was late. Well—I see by your faces that you are discussing the situation—trying, I doubt, to solve the mystery—eh? I try as well tell you at once that I have been entirely misled, and though my hands in this affair are not altogether spotless, yet I am— you will admit when you know the truth—no worse than others."

The man's calm confidence amazed us. "I admit," the fellow went on, "that I am not what I pretend to be. Miss Maynard, to whom I now offer my profoundest apologies and regrets, will tell you the truth later. In this matter, however, I have been the victim of a most remarkable and ingenious conspiracy. I have only escaped death by an act!"

"You!" I gasped, incredulously. "But you are Garshore's worst enemy!" "Gosh, me, and I'll tell you what occurred, and how I was induced to act as I have done," he urged, quickly looking from Myra's pale face to that of the girl who had once placed her faith in him. "What I'm about to tell you is a remarkable story; but I will afterward furnish proof of it—of every word of it." Then turning to Myra, he said: "From you, Mr. Gough, I have to crave forgiveness, for your arrival in London from Bucharest, I was induced to join in a dastardly plot. At the time I was in entire ignorance of what was intended."

Granny nodded, but uttered no word. We were all breathless in attention. "I regarded his words as lies, for had I not in my possession those crinkled parchments which plainly showed him to be an expert poisoner? Had I not emelt the manufacture of that fatal compound within his house?"

"I admit, Mr. Gough, that I feared you then—as, indeed, I fear you now," the man known as Garshore went on. "Then Lydia and her maid—told me in the first place that you knew the actual truth of my real name and my past. Lydia declared that, being jealous of her, you had quarreled with and killed young Prince Grellano in Vienna. There were persons who had overheard your quarrel. Lydia wished to get rid of you and asked me to assist her, for by so doing we should close your mouth. Well, the conspiracy was arranged entirely by Lydia, who caused the furnished house to be taken by her maid Marie, and who suggested most of the details of the cunning and elaborate plot, the real motive of which, I confess, I never dreamed. The arrangement was that you were to be entrapped in that house, and arrested under the warrant already out for you as the assassin of the young prince in Vienna. It was her revenge, she declared, and she bade me leave all the arrangements entirely in her hands. I had, of course, no idea that the secret prime-mover of it all was her husband, Branchini!"

Then he paused for a moment and glanced round, before he continued. "She already knew of my acquaintance with Miss Maynard yonder, and of her friendship with Myra Stapleton, Mr. Gough's fiancée, whereupon she made the cruel suggestion—which at the time appeared to me, I admit—that Miss Elfrida should be induced to go there in secret on the night in question and witness the arrest of Myra's prospective husband."

"Then that is why I received the urgent telegram purporting to come from Mr. Gough and stating that he had an important message for me to convey to Myra."

"I sent that wire, Miss Maynard," Garshore said in a humble tone. "At that time, I never dreamed how cleverly I myself was being deceived, or of the dastardly motives of the pair. I dared not denounce them for fear of what they might allege against myself."

"Well," I ejaculated, "tell us exactly what occurred at Redcliffe Gardens. Explain why Marie Lebas was dressed in one of her mistress's gowns." "She did so at her mistress's instigation—as part of the plot," Garshore responded. "Marie, she told me, was an actual witness of the crime in Vienna, and would identify your friend Gough to the police on their arrival at a house she had already prearranged. She, Lydia, did not wish to appear connected with the affair in any way, so that evening, after we drove away from the Cecil, she went down to Hastings and stayed at the Queen's, while I took train to Ipswich, where I put up at the Great White Horse. All this was to avoid any charge of collusion later."

"But what did actually occur?" I asked.

"Shall I relate what I heard and saw?" asked Elfrida, quickly, taking a step forward.

"Yes, do," cried Myra. "Why did you not already tell me?"

"Because I—I feared Mr. Garshore," she explained. "Once, not so very long ago, he compelled me to cash a cheque for £220 at a bank in the Uxbridge road—a cheque which I suspected was forged. I saw the hue and cry about it in the papers, and it came to me and declared that if he were arrested he would denounce me as his accomplice. I was an accessory to the forgery!"

"You blackguard!" I cried, my fists clenched, my eyes flashing in anger. "I admit it, Mr. Ralston—I entirely admit it," he said coolly. "But when you have heard all, you will, I trust, find some extenuating circumstances, and declare that things are not quite so black against me as they now appear."

I recollected those yellow, half-faded parchments, and turned from

him in disgust. His humility, in face of his apparent guilt, outraged our intelligence.

"Listen!" exclaimed the girl, whose wonderful eyes held me beneath her spell. "I will explain what happened to that night. I left my mother in the Hotel Metropole at 10.30, and instead of going to bed I took a cab to Redcliffe Gardens expecting to meet Mr. Gough. The door was opened by a woman, whom I naturally supposed to be Mademoiselle Popescu, for the telegram had given her name. She apologized for her servant's having gone to bed, and invited me into the drawing-room, telling me that Mr. Gough would arrive presently. Scarcely had I seated myself when there was a ring at the door, and she went to it. I heard Mr. Gough, express sudden surprise at her dress, then I overheard her exclaim: 'Sh-sh!' warningly, and this set me thinking. On entering the drawing-room, the lady's manner suddenly changed, for still standing, she charged him openly with having killed young Prince Grellano in Vienna, adding that two police officers were outside, and that she was about to identify him as the murderer. We were both struck dumb. Mr. Gough, who had come there in response to a telegram signed with my name, protested his innocence but faintly, as though he was well aware that circumstantial evidence was against him. A long and very heated argument ensued. At last Marie said: 'You do not leave this house a free man. You were jealous of my mistress and you killed M'sieur Paul!'

"Mr. Garshore was not present?" I asked Myra.

"No," I never saw him," was Elfrida's quick response. "There was a struggle. Mr. Gough hurling an ornament across the room in his endeavor to escape. The woman, who had locked the doors, sent me through the folding doors to the window of the next room to motion to the police outside. I went, peered through the Venetian blinds, but could not see anybody. On returning in my excitement a few moments later I found to my dismay, that a curtain had been pulled down, and the young woman was lying upon the floor gasping: 'You hear! she ejaculated with great difficulty, 'It is me, M'sieur—M'sieur—who—' and she sank back, her jaw held rigid in the last gasp of death. Upon the table I saw a knife, and turning to Mr. Gough when I realized the terrible truth, demanded of him what had occurred. He explained that he had brought the weapon for his own protection, suspecting he was to meet his bitterest enemy, Garshore, although he had come there in response to an urgent telegram purporting to be signed by himself. The police, some how, discovered that I had been in the house, but the statement I made in order to shield myself only further incriminated Mr. Gough."

"It's true," declared Granny, his big clean-shaven face pale and haggard. "I took that knife from your room, Phil. It was the only weapon I could get at that hour. Alone with that woman Marie I tried to escape. But she held me, and wrecked the place. I took the knife from my pocket in a frenzy of madness, hoping to thus frighten her, and get away from the place, Elfrida being in the next room. But the woman was cool and dant. She laughed in my face, and taking up her mistress's big silver-topped bottle of smelling salts sniffed it, in order, I suppose, to calm her nerves. Ten seconds later she staggered, turned pale as death, and sank upon the floor. I believed that her heart had failed through fright at my desperate action and my threats, for I saw her lips turning blue and a slight white foam appearing upon her mouth. Elfrida returned in a few seconds, and I pointed out that she was dying. In a few moments life became extinct, and we both fled, mystified, puzzled, each pledging the other to absolute secrecy. And there," he concluded, "you have the entire truth."

A few seconds of strained silence ensued. It was Garshore who spoke.

To be continued.

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